

Franklin Gowen

It was December 13, 1889, and the staff at Washington's Wormley Hotel at 1500 H Street was concerned about a guest. Run by James Wormely, a Black man who had been employed by hotels in Europe, it was considered the best hotel in the capital. The last thing they wanted was a scandal. The guest was Franklin Gowen, former president of the Reading Railroad who usually came down early for breakfast. He had come to Washington several days before for a meeting of the Interstate Commerce Commission. He was defending railroad revenue rates.



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Now it was one o'clock in the afternoon. Gowen was last seen the night before sipping a glass of champagne with dinner, the only alcohol that he was seen drinking that evening. Repeated knocking on Gowen's door brought no response. After summoning police, an agile member of the staff climbed into the room through the transom. The Evening Star newspaper described what he saw. Gowen's body was on the floor, his head half hidden under a table. He had apparently been facing a mirror. On the hearth several feet from the body was a new Smith and Wesson .38, its ivory handle coated with blood. Gowen's bloodied body with a severe head wound was lying nearby. The owner of Woford's Hardware on Pennsylvania Avenue later identified Gowen as the customer that had purchased the gun. None of the other guests at Wormely's Hotel claimed to have heard a gunshot or any other noise. Suicide was the obvious cause. But a lot of people had a tough time believing that someone like Gowen, who had a habit of cultivating antagonists, did not have someone who might have wanted to do him in.

Many years later in suburban Philadelphia, the late Lance Metz, historian for Hugh Moore Park and Canal Museum, was looking carefully at the diaries of Robert Sayre, a founder of the Lehigh Valley Railroad and Bethlehem Iron (later Steel). They had recently been acquired from a family member. As he opened the limp leather volume for 1889, a carefully folded newspaper article fell to the floor. It was a copy of Franklin Gowen's obituary, apparently untouched since Sayre put it there many years before.

In the last years of his life Gowen had been involved with Sayre in a railroad project that failed.

To say Franklin Benjamin Gowen (1836-1889) was a controversial figure would be a gross understatement. Many in the coal regions and yards of the Reading Railroad which he once ruled must have cheered at his demise. But there were others who mourned. On March 7, 1890, at the prestigious American Philosophical Society, Richard Vaux, the mayor of Philadelphia, gave a eulogy before the assembled members, saying in part:

"His life was remarkable. It was a lesson and example. His mind of more than exceptional power. His energy seemed exhaustless. A courage that met, without hesitancy, opposition and antagonism, was animated by a temper so sanguine that defeat was obscured by brilliant promise of anticipated success. Mr. Gowen was devoted to literature, assiduously cultivating his taste for it with highest scientific knowledge to which he applied intelligent study, and was an impressive lawyer."

In fact, Gowen was in many ways a product of his time and place and particularly American. Born in Philadelphia, he was the fifth child of James Gowen. An Irish Protestant immigrant, the elder Gowen ran a successful grocery business. Franklin Gowen's mother was Pennsylvania German. He left formal education at 13 but eventually went on to Pottsville where he apparently "read law" with an attorney.

Also in those years he formed the Pottsville Literary Society and was known for his dramatic readings. He also worked as a clerk for an iron furnace and entered into a partnership in a coal mine which failed. In 1862 he was elected district attorney of Schuylkill County. Gowen gave up that post in 1864 to go into private practice. It was here he took his first cases for the Reading Railroad.

Founded as the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad in the 1830s, it was created for the hauling of anthracite coal from Schuylkill County to Philadelphia. Gowen eventually became chief counsel of the railroad and in 1870 was elected the Reading's president. One of Gowen's chief actions as president was to acquire coal mine properties and therefore control the price of the supply. Technically this was against the charter creating the Reading, which forbade it from owning coal mines. But Gowen did this in a way that kept the purchases secret. When it became known, it was decided by the legislature that it had gone too far to be stopped.

Gowen's biggest conflict came with a young coal miners' union, the Workingmen's Benevolent Association headed by John Siney. It was probably inevitable that Gowen, being who he was, and the miners, being who they were, would clash. Northern Irish Protestants and Irish Catholics had a historical record of conflict at least as far back as the Battle of the

Boyne in the 1690s. The ongoing potato famine that was driving the Irish from their homes to America, coupled with the horrors of 19th century coal mining, would not make for good relations.

The so called "Gowen Compromise" that one source noted "tied wages to the rise and fall of anthracites prices," was another bone of contention. This caused outrage in the state legislature. It was in hearings before the legislature that Gowen decided to try another tactic. Using his skills at elocution and oratory that made him such a popular public speaker and skillful lawyer, he basically said W.B.A. was nothing but a front; good men, perhaps, but deluded by "communist" radicals and violence:

"I do not charge this Workingmen's Benevolent Association with it, but I say there is an association which votes in secret, at night, that men's lives shall be taken, that they shall be shot before their wives, murdered in cold blood, for daring to work against this order....I do not blame this association, but I blame another association for doing it; and it happens that the only men who were shot who dare to disobey the mandates of the Workingmen's Benevolent Association."

This was the beginning of what later became known as the Molly Maguires. Gowen's use of the word "communists" was not common in America at the time but at roughly the same period in 1871 the rise of the Paris Commune of radicals following the collapse of the French government in the Franco Prussian War was in the newspapers and Gowen may have tapped into this fear. In speeches he "connected" the union to supposed international radicals in Ireland, London and Paris.

"Arrests, trials, convictions and hangings of Molly Maguires occurred in the adjoining counties of Schuylkill and Carbon in 1876-78," notes one source. "Catholics were excluded from juries. Gowen himself acted as special prosecutor in more than one trial." Gowen even brought in Allen Pinkerton's detectives to go undercover. Many years later Sir Arthur Conan Doyle turned these exploits into a Sherlock Holmes story, "The Valley of Fear." John "Black Jack" Kehoe was the most famous of the Mollies to be tried and later executed. Over 100 years later he was given a posthumous pardon by Pennsylvania's Governor Milton Shapp.

Throughout the 1870s as strikes roiled the railroad industry Gowen continued to borrow more and more money to purchase more and more anthracite lands. In the process he got the Reading Railroad deeper in debt. Finally in 1880 even the fiscal legerdemain of Franklin Gowen could do no more. The Reading Railroad was bankrupt. "It was significant misjudgments on Gowen's part that led to the Reading Railroad's collapse," notes one source.

Thanks to improved economic times in the 1880s the Reading Railroad began to emerge from bankruptcy. But Gowen was eventually removed as

president. "You were not a very successful president of this company, and now other people have got a hold of it; we are responsible, and you are not," the incoming president told him. Gowen was furious and as a consolation they made him chief counsel. He could offer advice but could make no decisions.

But Gowen would not sit still and in 1885 and 1886 he was fighting again. Finally, he was up against banker J.P. Morgan. He told the Reading board Gowen must go if his firm was going to be involved. A member of Morgan's firm had this to say of Gowen:

"In order for there to be peace it has been found necessary to get rid of Mr. Gowen. We have all combined to get him out of railroad management just as all the powers of Europe combined to crush Napoleon and there will be no peace until Mr. Gowen is in St. Helena. He is an able and a brilliant man in some respects, but he is no railroad manager.... The trouble with Mr. Gowen is that he wants to be fighting all the time. When he was after the Molly Maguires he was in his element, but as a railroad manager he is a failure."

Gowen took this judgement hard. By 1889 friends and family thought he was acting oddly. He seemed confused, as if he lost his sense of direction. He even got on the wrong train. There was suggestion of mental illness in his family. Following his death there were all sorts of theories, some suspecting a revenge killing by the Mollies. But Gowen's family, after hiring a private detective, decided it was indeed a suicide.



Reading Railroad historian James Holton has this to say of Gowen:

"Simply put, Gowen turned the company from one of economic conservatism to daring adventurism. Every aspect of the Reading Company's existence was to be enervated and agitated and sometimes turned topsy-turvy during the Gowen years of the 1870s and 1880s. The few scrapes of letters and memoranda from Gowen that shed some light tend to indicate that he was impatient, even bored when details of real railroading came to his attention. It was corporate power and financial finagling that interested this complex man...Gowen's financial rewards were meager, and

while he did attain considerable public attention and the trappings of his office, this dynamic leader ultimately was consumed by his final failure and his career ended in tragedy.”